

# Traveller Impressions of Lake Champlain Steamboats, 1827-1842

**Carolyn Kennedy**

*In the first half of the nineteenth century, Lake Champlain became increasingly famous for its magnificent passenger steamboats. Not only were residents of the Champlain Valley filled with pride over these vessels, but the steamers earned international acclaim. This article presents primary source evidence describing Lake Champlain's Golden Age steamers from local, regional, and international travellers' accounts which describe the appearance and operations of these lake boats from the 1820s and 1830s. Despite travel diaries including problematic biases, this evidence fills gaps in our knowledge of the build of these steamboats left by the analyses of their archaeological remains.*

*Dans la première moitié du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, le lac Champlain est devenu de plus en plus connu pour ses magnifiques bateaux à vapeur à passagers. Non seulement les résidents de la vallée du lac Champlain étaient fiers de ces navires, mais les navires ont aussi acquis une renommée internationale. À partir de témoignages obtenus de sources primaires, cet article décrit les bateaux à vapeur de l'âge d'or du lac Champlain suivant les récits de voyageurs locaux, régionaux et internationaux qui traitent de l'apparence et des opérations de ces bateaux au cours des années 1820 et 1830. Malgré des carnets de voyage qui comportent des partialités problématiques, ces témoignages comblent les lacunes de nos connaissances sur la construction de ces bateaux à vapeur laissées par les analyses de leurs vestiges archéologiques.*

Steam travel came into its heyday on the inland waterways of eastern North America in the 1820s and 1830s. Steamboats were particularly well suited to North America where roads were not well established, and the numerous rivers and

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lakes were the best way to travel.<sup>1</sup> These early decades of the nineteenth century were a period of dynamic experimentation among North American steamboat shipwrights. With the rules of sailing ships no longer applicable, steamboats were generally built by trial and error, and often hauled out of the water for alterations as soon as within their first year of operations.<sup>2</sup> For example, the Lake Champlain steamer *Winooski* (1832-1850) was lengthened 32 feet (9.75 m) in the first few years of its career. Thus, any plans that may have existed at its launch would not resemble the hull when it sank.<sup>3</sup> The rapidly improving steam technology of these decades made steam-powered vessels extremely popular among the masses. Meanwhile, increasing competition drove steamboat companies to fit out their boats to the highest standards, constantly improving and upgrading from season to season in order to attract the most passengers.

While these accelerated hull developments were likely reflected in the interior décor and passenger comforts of the boats as well, few historical plans or notes were made of these arrangements or alterations, and the archaeological record is severely lacking in this area. As such, neither the historical ship plans nor the archaeological record alone can fully satisfy our understanding of these steamboats' appearances and working lives – an issue that became apparent during the Shelburne Shipyard Steamboat Graveyard Project, which involved the study of four steamboat hulls that currently lie in Shelburne Shipyard, Lake Champlain, Vermont.<sup>4</sup> Research conducted for this project, however, highlights how contemporary descriptions from travellers' journals can help to fill this gap in our understanding by providing first-person impressions of the steamers' operations, speed, interior decorations, and life on board that are otherwise unattainable through archaeological investigations. Although

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Hillstrom and Laurie Collier Hillstrom, *Industrial Revolution in America: Steam Shipping* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC CLIO, 2005), 20-21, 24.

<sup>2</sup> David Stevenson, *Sketch of the Civil Engineering of North America* (London: John Weale, 1859), 72.

<sup>3</sup> *Burlington (Vermont) Free Press*, 13 May 1836, 3.

<sup>4</sup> The project ran as a field school under Principal Investigators Kevin Crisman and the author in cooperation with the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum (co-organized with Christopher Sabick, the museum's director of archaeology & research) with permission from the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation. The project was funded by grants from the Center for Maritime Archaeology and Conservation, the Institute of Nautical Archaeology, and the National Parks Services Maritime Heritage Program. The project goals were to establish the identities and study the construction of four historic steamboats resting on the bottom of the shallow harbor to better understand how early steamboat builders on Lake Champlain were adapting traditional shipbuilding methods to best suit the new form of propulsion that was the steam engine.



Lake Champlain in relation to major waterways and cities. These include the St. Lawrence River (north) and Hudson River (south), and four major cities: Québec City (northeast), Montreal (north), Albany (south), and New York City (south). (Reprinted from Google Earth, 2018)

travel accounts are often imbued with bias, either to highlight the travellers' sublime vacation or to complain about the hardships endured throughout their travels, the information they provide makes an essential contribution to an anthropological, historical, and archaeological comprehension of early North American steamboats.<sup>5</sup>

### Lake Champlain Passenger Steamboats in the 1820s and 1830s

During the 1820s and 1830s, Lake Champlain's passenger steamboat business was controlled by two primary companies, the Lake Champlain Steamboat Company (LCSC) (1814-1833) and the Champlain Transportation Company (CTC) (started in 1826, still in existence today under the name Lake Champlain Transportation). Smaller partnerships and companies had some success in passenger steam transportation on the lake, but for the most part

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<sup>5</sup> See Jerry Bentley, "Travel Narratives," George Mason University, Center for History and New Media, n.d., <https://chnm.gmu.edu/worldhistorysources/unpacking/travelscholar.html>, for a discussion on biases detected in historical travel narratives.

these were outcompeted or bought out within a few years.<sup>6</sup> Between the years 1814 and 1820, the LCSC launched five passenger boats from their base of operations in Vergennes, Vermont, situated along the bank of Otter Creek which flows into the lake. In 1821, the company moved their shipyard from Vergennes to Shelburne Point to be more central on the lake.<sup>7</sup> In 1827, the CTC launched



Champlain Transportation Company Logo.  
(Lake Champlain Maritime Museum Collection)

their first boat, *Franklin*, from St. Alban's Bay. Soon afterwards the newer company also moved their base of operations to Shelburne Point, buying up property surrounding the LCSC. Finally, in 1833, they bought the older company's entire property at Shelburne Point, including the steamers *Phoenix* and *Congress*, "together with all & singular the engines, boilers, furnaces, tools, compasses, sails, awnings, yard, anchors, cables, ropes, covers, boats, oars, guns, tackle, apparel & furniture ... chattels."<sup>8</sup>

Both the LCSC and CTC built and operated large and ornate sidewheeler steamboats for passenger transportation up and down the lake. In the 1820s and 1830s, these boats ranged from 108 feet (32.9 m) to 215 feet (65.5 m) in length, among the largest for inland waterway travel in the world. The earlier vessels were powered by crosshead-beam engines, but those launched in the late 1830s (*Burlington* [1837] and *Whitehall* [1838]) employed the newer walking-beam engines that became typical of the eastern waterways throughout the rest of the nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Typically, the wooden boats lasted between

<sup>6</sup> Carolyn Kennedy, "The History and Archaeology of the Lake Champlain Steamboat *Phoenix II* (1820-1837)" (PhD diss, Texas A&M University, 2019), 73-79.

<sup>7</sup> Also, by moving operations to the widest point of the lake (albeit in a sheltered bay), they prolonged their running season as Otter Creek froze earlier and thawed later than the rest of the lake. See Jerry Aske Jr., *From Steamboats to Subchasers: A History of the Shelburne Shipyard* (Shelburne, Vermont: Red Barn Books, 2012), 1.

<sup>8</sup> "The Sale of 'Phoenix' and 'Congress' to Champlain Trans. Co., February 22, 1833," Collection A, Carton 1, Folder 178, Champlain Transportation Company Records, University of Vermont Special Collections & University Archives. The *Phoenix* discussed throughout this paper was only called *Phoenix* at the time, but was the second *Phoenix* to steam on Lake Champlain and therefore may be identified as *Phoenix* (II) elsewhere.

<sup>9</sup> Ogden Ross, *The Steamboats of Lake Champlain 1809-1930* (Burlington, Vermont: Vermont Heritage Press, 1997), 61-65; "Miscellaneous Papers October 17-November 3, 1836,"



The four steamboat wrecks that were the focus of the Shelburne Shipyard Steamboat Graveyard Project. These include: 1. *A. Williams*; 2. *Phoenix*; 3. *Burlington*; and 4. *Whitehall*. (Reprinted from Bing Maps, 2013)



The author recording the hull construction details of *Phoenix*. (Photo by Kotaro Yamafune, 2016)

ten and twenty years on the freshwater lake before rot overtook their hulls. Once the steamers were deemed too old and outdated to continue running, the companies retired them by removing any items that could be reused, sold, or scrapped, such as the outfitting and machinery, and leaving the wooden hulls to sink in the harbour around the Shelburne Shipyard.

### The Shelburne Shipyard Steamboat Graveyard Project (2014-2016)

Between 2014 and 2016 an archaeological investigation of the Shelburne Shipyard harbour, under the direction of Dr. Kevin Crisman and the author, revealed the identities of four wrecks: *A. Williams* (1870-1893), *Phoenix* (1820-1837), *Burlington* (1837-1854), and *Whitehall* (1838-1853), that had been intentionally scuttled.<sup>10</sup> The four wrecks in such close proximity provided archaeologists with the chance to examine not only some of the earliest archaeological examples of steamboats, but also the major changes in steamboat hull construction that took place in the 1820s and 1830s. This study also prompted historical research into the working lives of these steamers to supplement the information gleaned from the archaeological remains. Among what was found pertaining to these wrecks were historical accounts from travellers aboard two of the four boats, *Phoenix* and *Burlington*, and similar records from travellers aboard another steamer, *Franklin* (1827-1837),



Champlain Transportation Company posters from two separate years, showing the names *Franklin* and *Phoenix* on identical generic steamboat images. (Reprinted from Ross, *Steamboats*, 52, 38)

Collection A, Carton 3, Folder 20, Champlain Transportation Company Records, University of Vermont Special Collections & University Archive; and Mariner's Museum and A.J. Peluso, Jr., *The Bard Brothers* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Carolyn Kennedy, "Shelburne Shipyard Steamboat Graveyard: Archaeological Investigation of Four Steamboat Wreck" (Master's thesis, Texas A&M University, 2015). Note that at the time of the writing of this Master's thesis the identity of Wreck 2, now known to be *Phoenix*, was believed to be the steamer *Winooski*.

which operated contemporaneously. These journals have contributed to a more complete understanding of what these steamboats looked like and how they ran, providing essential information unattainable through the archaeological investigation.

Contemporary traveller accounts are especially helpful for revealing details pertaining to early nineteenth-century boats that predated the widespread use of photography, such as the furnishings and upperworks of these steamers that are no longer present among their archaeological remains.<sup>11</sup> Though in some cases pre-photography-era steamers were well captured by artists, such as the Bard brothers' excellent and detailed portraits of early Hudson River steamers, no known equivalents exist for the Champlain boats.<sup>12</sup> The iconographic evidence for these lake steamers is limited to woodcuts that were typically generic representations of steamboats, and were interchangeably used for different vessels. For example, one woodcut used to represent *Phoenix* in 1823 was also used to represent *Congress* in 1819, a St. Lawrence River steamer, *La Prairie*, in 1822, and *General Greene* in 1825. A second woodcut was used to represent *Congress* in 1824, and both *Congress* and *Phoenix* in 1825 and 1826. A third steamboat representation of *Phoenix* was used on a poster in 1834, but that same year *Franklin* was represented by the exact same image of a steamboat, with only the name on the side changed (see image above).<sup>13</sup> Since these woodcuts and poster representations are unreliable, travellers' descriptions can enlighten us as to these boats' individual features.

### Elegant Lake Champlain Steamboats and their Captains

Lake Champlain's steamboats were a source of pride among the residents of the Champlain Valley. As one writer to the *Burlington Free Press* wrote in 1835, "we are free to acknowledge not a little local pride in the character of our steam boats, and why should it be otherwise? Go where we will we hear them praised for their regularity, neatness, and the gentlemanly deportment of their commanders."<sup>14</sup> The same nameless contributor also described a friend's experience of traveling through America who had "just returned from a tour of some thousand miles through the middle and western states." The friend had "travelled leisurely in post coaches – been spirited over [*sic*] vallies [*sic*],

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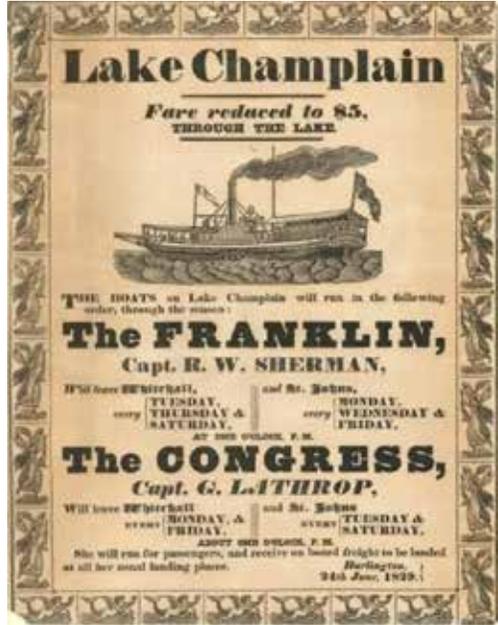
<sup>11</sup> Daguerreotype photography was invented in 1839 but was expensive and not widely used until much later, see Juliet Hacking, *Photography: The Whole History* (New York: Prestel, 2012), 18.

<sup>12</sup> Mariner's Museum and Peluso, *Bard Brothers*.

<sup>13</sup> Ross, *Steamboats*, 38, 52.

<sup>14</sup> *Burlington (Vermont) Free Press*, 7 August 1835, 2.

An 1829 broadside for Franklin and Congress. (Lake Champlain Maritime Museum Collection)



and *through* [*sic*] mountains,” he had “been ... tost [*sic*] on Lake Erie” and “had scaled the Alleghnoies [*sic*] in a Dutch wagon.” Finally, on his return home to the Champlain Valley, after being “elbowed about by seven hundred passengers on the North River,” this traveling friend had concluded that: “if there was any pleasure in travelling it was not to be found on board of steam boats. But eight hours experience on board the *Phoenix* led him to an entirely different conclusion, and he now assures that a trip to the west would be altogether a desirable affair, provided Capt. Lyon could be persuaded to run his boat as far as St. Louis.”<sup>15</sup> Evidently, the CTC (owners of *Phoenix* by this time) maintained their boats very well since the wooden-hulled vessel was fifteen years old in 1835 when this commentary was submitted to the *Burlington Free Press*.<sup>16</sup> Fifteen years was old for a wooden boat and yet the steamer still earned high praise from its passengers.<sup>17</sup>

Locals were not the only travellers to notice Lake Champlain steamboats – Americans, Canadians, and Europeans alike took passage on these boats on their way to or from Montreal and New York City. International visitors

<sup>15</sup> Ross, *Steamboats*, 2.

<sup>16</sup> Ross, *Steamboats*, 39.

<sup>17</sup> The average lifespan of a Lake Champlain wooden-hulled passenger steamboat was sixteen years, or thirteen for those built prior to 1850, from F.H. Wilkins, “Lake Champlain Steamers,” *The Vermonter* 21, no. 1 (1916): 13-16.

specifically sought out steam travel in the northeast to take in the sights along the Hudson River Valley and the shores of Lake Champlain.<sup>18</sup> Among these foreigners, a few kept detailed accounts of their travels on Lake Champlain steamers, including young English gentleman Thomas Cather, Montreal merchant, journalist, and political reformer Thomas S. Brown, British former navy commander Basil Hall, his wife Margaret, and famous English writer Charles Dickens. Most of these tourists commended the lakes' steamers and the boats often stand out as a highlight of their journeys.

Passenger steamboats were generally well decorated and Lake Champlain steamers were among the best. Only a year after that anonymous traveller so highly commended *Phoenix* in the *Burlington Free Press*, Englishman Thomas Cather travelled through Lake Champlain by steamboat on his way south. He boarded *Franklin* in St. John's (Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu), whose captain at that time was Richard W. Sherman.<sup>19</sup> Cather summed up his impression of the steamer with one line, claiming "everything was in apple pie order."<sup>20</sup> American steamboats were entirely different from European and United Kingdom steamers, and therefore hard to compare. At this point in his travels, however, Cather had seen many American boats, and was clearly impressed by *Franklin*.<sup>21</sup> Cather was even more impressed by Captain Sherman:

The choice of his dress had evidently cost him serious deliberation and the arrangement of it no little trouble. His whiskers were oiled and curled, and the delicate blush on his cheek plainly announced that the rouge pot was one of the articles of his toilet. He moved about with the mincing step of a *Petit Maitre*, evidently on the very best terms with himself and looking as spruce and unruffled as if he had just stepped out of a band box.<sup>22</sup>

Cather's description illustrates an excellent, if somewhat insulting, picture of Captain Sherman, who was clearly invested in his looks.

Richard's father, Captain Jahaziel Sherman, was also a steamboat captain for the CTC earlier in the company's history.<sup>23</sup> The elder Captain Sherman

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<sup>18</sup> Allyn H. Lange, "The Golden Age of Steamboats," *Hudson River Maritime Museum Pilot Log* (2010/2011): 20; [https://www.hrmm.org/uploads/2/6/3/3/26336013/the\\_golden\\_age\\_of\\_steamboats\\_2010-2011.pdf](https://www.hrmm.org/uploads/2/6/3/3/26336013/the_golden_age_of_steamboats_2010-2011.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> *Burlington Free Press*, 17 June 1836, 4.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Yoseloff (ed.), *Voyage to America: The Journals of Thomas Cather* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1961), 161-162.

<sup>21</sup> Stevenson, *Sketch of the Civil Engineering*, 70.

<sup>22</sup> Yoseloff, *Voyage to America*, 161-162.

<sup>23</sup> Kevin Crisman, Carolyn Kennedy, and George Schwarz, "Vermont's Steamboat Pioneer: Captain Jahaziel Sherman of Vergennes," *Vermont History* 86, no. 2 (2018): 126.

was credited as a leader of steam transportation on Lake Champlain, whose “experience in the transportation of passengers had made him familiar with what was necessary for their comfort, and being a man of energy and decision, he instilled it into all around him.”<sup>24</sup> Captain Richard Sherman inherited his father’s good name and reputation, and upheld his family’s lofty status by maintaining order and appearances, not only in himself, but also on board his vessel.<sup>25</sup> Cather recounted, “[the] captain’s office was like a little temple, profusely decorated with china and glass ornaments, rare seaweed and shells, artificial flowers etc.,” and he described the stewardess and steward as both dressing and behaving like aristocrats, clearly indicating that the younger Captain Sherman’s emphasis on appearances.<sup>26</sup>

Although Cather was ultimately quite impressed with the steamer and its crew, he does provide some insight into the social culture of the region: he notes that only after he and his dinner group left, were the Black gentlemen passengers invited to the dining hall to eat dinner. He sarcastically pointed out that, “in this land of liberty, the blacks, no matter what may be their station, are not allowed to mix with the white Massas [*sic*].”<sup>27</sup> It is surprisingly rare to come across any written notice of Black steamboat passengers from these years, and therefore this social commentary in Cather’s log is all the more enlightening as to the treatment of African Americans on steamboats.

In October 1837, Thomas S. Brown – the journalist and politician from Montreal, Lower Canada (present-day Quebec) – took passage on the maiden voyage of the CTC’s newest boat and Captain Richard Sherman’s newest charge, *Burlington*. Brown remarked upon the superlative aesthetics of this steamboat’s outfitting:

Gentlemen’s Cabin below contain 120 berths, well lighted; Ladies’ Cabin on deck 20 berths; Promenade deck, supported by slender oak pillars, runs the whole length except a short break running across between the forward gangways. The main deck is superior to any thing I ever saw afloat; block cornice all around, paneled doors, plated handles, with Pilasters and Doric capitals; carved sashes, and about the quarter deck, the panels are all finished with rich carved moulding; stair cases and bar mahogany. Every thing connected with the upper works is made as light as can be, consistent with necessary strength, and all throughout painted white.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Abby Maria Hemenway, “Lake Champlain,” *Vermont Historical Gazetteer* 1 (1867): 702.

<sup>25</sup> Ross, *Steamboats*, 66.

<sup>26</sup> Yoseloff, *Voyage to America*, 161-162.

<sup>27</sup> Yoseloff, *Voyage to America*, 162.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas S. Brown, *Montreal Vindicator*, 24 October 1837, 3.

**Lake Champlain  
STEAM BOATS**



**PHENIX & CONGRESS.**

**THE Phoenix**, I. R. HARRINGTON, master, will commence her regular trips, by leaving Whitehall every Tuesday and Saturday at 2 o'clock, P. M. and St. Johns every Monday and Friday at 8 o'clock, A. M.

**The Congress**, G. LATHROP, master, will be engaged in towing Rafts until about the 20th of May, after which she will join the Phoenix in a regular line; due notice of which will hereafter be given. Previous to that time, the Phoenix will touch at Charlotte, going north, every Tuesday evening, and at Essex every Saturday evening. Returning south, she will touch at Essex every Monday evening, and at Charlotte every Friday evening.

**PRICE OF PASSAGE :**  
*From Whitehall to St. Johns, and from St. Johns to Whitehall, &c.*

FROM WHITEHALL,	
To Stoney Point or Shoals,	\$1
" Ticonderoga,	1 25
" Catlin's Ferry, (Bridport,)	1 50
" Chimney Point,	2
" Port Henry, Dalliba's Works,	2 25
" Barber's Point, (Westport,)	2 25
" Fort Cassin, (for Vergennes,)	2 50
" Essex or Charlotte,	3
" Burlington,	3 50
" Port Kent,	4
" Plattsburgh,	4 50
" Chazy,	4 75
" Champlain,	5
" Isle Aux Noix,	6
" St. Johns,	6

FROM ST. JOHNS,	
To Isle Aux Noix,	\$1
" Champlain,	1 25
" Chazy,	1 50
" Plattsburgh,	2
" Port Kent,	2 50
" Burlington,	3
" Essex or Charlotte,	3 50
" Fort Cassin, (for Vergennes,)	3 75
" Barber's Point,	3 75
" Port Henry, Dalliba's Works,	4
" Chimney Point, (Westport,)	4 25
" Catlin's Ferry, (Bridport,)	4 50
" Ticonderoga,	4 75
" Shoals or Stoney Point,	5
" Whitehall,	6

Children from two to ten years of age, half price; under two years, quarter price. No passenger will be taken on board or put on shore, however short the distance, for less than 75 cents. For each dog, or other animal, not exceeding the size of a sheep, one dollar; they are to be tied on deck, forward of the capstan. Horses, Gigs, Waggon, &c. from Plattsburgh to Burlington, the same as last year. Passage from Burlington to Port Kent, 75 cents.

The Boats will take freight to any of their regular landing places south of Canada line, at \$1 50 per ton, unless the quantity is less than one ton, or more bulky than an average lot of common merchandise; in either of which cases, a reasonable price will be charged by the piece or parcel. Specie 50 cents per thousand dollars. Freight to Canada will be charged at \$2 per ton.

After the Congress commences her regular trips, one of the boats will leave Whitehall every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday at 9 o'clock A. M. and St. Johns every Monday and Thursday at 8 o'clock A. M. and every Friday at 2 o'clock P. M.

The boats are in first rate order, and the best arrangements are made to facilitate business and accommodate the publick.

Vergennes, April 7, 1827. w15

An 1827 notice for steamboats Phoenix and Congress. (*Northern Sentinel* (Burlington, VT), 26 Oct. 1827)

Brown's testimony is a rare look into the fully furnished 1830s Lake Champlain steamboat. While multiple newspapers claim the steamboats were expertly fitted out, Brown gives details that were probably never officially recorded and are no longer present among the archaeological remains. Since *Burlington* and these other early Lake Champlain steamboats operated before photography became mainstream, primary written sources provide our only window into the inside of these steamers. With Jahaziel Sherman as a director of the company that built the boat, and Richard Sherman as its captain, *Burlington* was undoubtedly upheld to the highest standards, the same as the Shermans

kept for themselves.

*Burlington's* grandeur was also remarked upon by Charles Dickens, during his travels across the United States in 1842. He noted that, "The steamboat which is called the *Burlington*, is a perfectly exquisite achievement of neatness, elegance and order. The decks are drawingrooms; the cabins are boudoirs, choicely furnished and adorned with prints, pictures and musical instruments; every nook and corner of the vessel is a perfect curiosity of graceful comfort and beautiful contrivance."<sup>29</sup> Dickens, like Cather, was as impressed by Captain Sherman as he was by the vessel. Whereas Cather was perhaps poking fun at the over-the-top orderliness and elegance that defined the captain, Dickens appreciated Sherman's "ingenuity and excellent taste" and commended him, giving him full credit for *Burlington's* appearance.<sup>30</sup> In this same description of Sherman, Dickens also stated that, "He and his vessel are held in universal respect, both by his own countrymen and ours; and no man ever enjoyed the popular esteem, who, in his sphere of action, won and wore it better than this gentleman."<sup>31</sup>

### Opposing Passenger Experiences

Unlike Cather and Dickens, Basil and Margaret Hall, who travelled by Lake Champlain steamboat in September 1827, were underwhelmed by their boat's appearance. Basil Hall instead complained about the "great staring lamp, trembling and waving about" in his cabin, clearly not impressed by the fittings of the steamer.<sup>32</sup> Basil did not provide the name of the vessel he and his wife took passage on, but the only passenger boats on the lake at that time were *Phoenix* and *Congress* (1818).<sup>33</sup>

After hearing such high praise for *Phoenix* from the anonymous traveller in 1835, it is hard to imagine that this is the same boat Basil Hall described in his journal. Like his comments on the décor, Hall was equally or possibly more unimpressed by his experience on board the Lake Champlain steamboat. He started his account, "Our route lay along Lake Champlain, in a very crowded steam-boat, filled with tourists," implying his immediate discomfort, and quickly confirmed this by saying, "Of all kinds of navigation that by steam is

<sup>29</sup> Charles Dickens, *American Notes and Pictures from Italy* (London: Chapman & Hall, Ltd., 1913), 176.

<sup>30</sup> Dickens, *American Notes*, 176.

<sup>31</sup> Dickens, *American Notes*, 176.

<sup>32</sup> Basil Hall, "Travels in North America," in *Foreign Travelers in America 1810-1935*, edited by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. and Eugene P. Moehring (New York: Arno Press, 1974), 4.

<sup>33</sup> Hemenway, "Lake Champlain," 693-694; Gideon Lathrop, *Gideon Lathrop, Diary, 1827-1842* (Kinderhook, NY: Columbia County Historical Society, n.d), 4-8.

certainly the most unpleasant.”<sup>34</sup> Hall had nothing kind to say about being a passenger on whichever Lake Champlain steamboat, *Phoenix* or *Congress*, he rode. He sarcastically wrote:

But we had experienced the true joys of a steam-boat during the previous night when making the voyage from North to South along Lake Champlain. The machinery was unusually noisy, the boat weak and tremulous, and we stopped, backed and went on again, at no fewer than eleven different places, at each of which there was such a racket, that it was impossible to get any rest. If a passenger did manage to doze off, under the combined influence of fatigue, and the monotonous sound of the rumbling wheels, which resembled eight or ten muffled kettle-drums, he was sure to be awakened by the quick ‘tinkle! tinkle!’ of the engineer’s bell, or the sharp voice of the pilot calling out ‘Stop her!’ or he might be jerked half out of his berth by a sound thump against the dock or wharf. If these were not enough, the rattle and bustle of lowering down the boat was sure to banish all remaining chance of sleep.<sup>35</sup>

Hall’s description seems almost malicious, especially in comparison to the praise Lake Champlain steamboats received only several years later. Hall’s wife, Margaret, shared his contempt, and wrote to a friend claiming, “The boat was without exception the noisiest steamer I have yet been in.”<sup>36</sup>

Though their narratives may be biased against the American boats on which they rode, or they may have simply wanted to air their travel grievances, the Halls could have had legitimate reason to complain. At the time of their passage *Congress* was nine years old and *Phoenix* was seven years old, both rather advanced ages for freshwater boats. Furthermore, in 1827 both boats were owned by the LCSC, the lake’s first passenger steamboat enterprise, which at this point was as-yet unchallenged. Perhaps the lack of competition for passengers led to the company’s lax service and upkeep on their steamers. Or perhaps, since in September 1827, *Congress*’ captain, Gideon Lathrop, was on leave visiting New York, his replacement was inexperienced.<sup>37</sup> If it was a trip on *Phoenix* that caused the Halls’ such misery, it was likely due to old engine machinery. Only two short months after their trip *Phoenix* was laid up for the season and a new engine was commissioned to replace the old one over

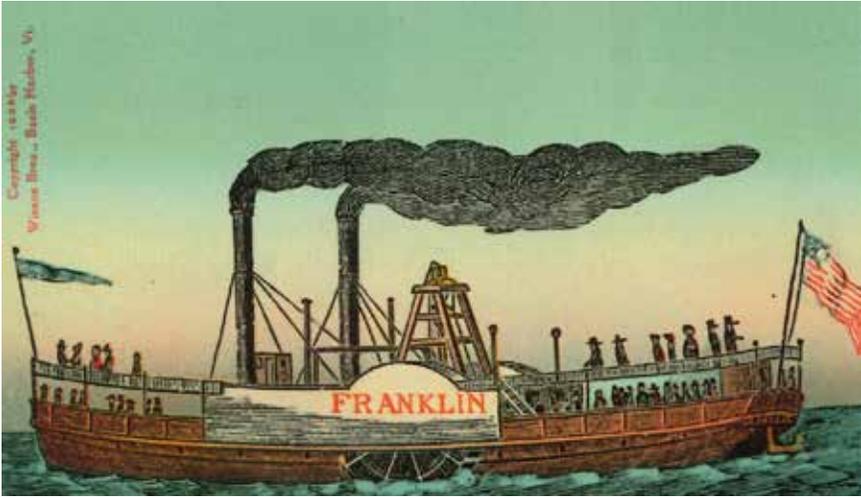
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<sup>34</sup> Hall, “Travels in North America,” 1, 4.

<sup>35</sup> Hall, “Travels in North America,” 5.

<sup>36</sup> Una Pope-Hennessy (ed.), *The Aristocratic Journey: Being the Outspoken Letters of Mrs. Basil Hall Written during a Fourteen Months’ Sojourn in America 1827-1828* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1931), 58.

<sup>37</sup> Lathrop, *Diary*, 8.



A 1909 postcard depicting the steamboat *Franklin* – part of a commemorative series featuring Lake Champlain's early steamboats. (Lake Champlain Maritime Museum Collection)

the winter of 1827-1828.<sup>38</sup> Whatever his reasons for being so harsh, Basil Hall does provide a glimpse of the unfortunate night passenger experience:

[In the cabin] were stretched numberless weary passengers – some on mattresses spread on the deck, others on lockers, or on the bare planks – the very picture of woe, like the field of battle after the din of war has ceased. Amongst these prostrate objects of compassion, various stray passengers might be seen picking their way, hunting for their bags and cloaks, and talking all night, in utter disregard of the unhappy wretches cooped up in the sleepless sleeping-births [*sic*] round about them. At every stopping place, fresh parties either came on board, or went away, or both, so that the overcrowded cabin was one scene of buzz! buzz! during this very long night.<sup>39</sup>

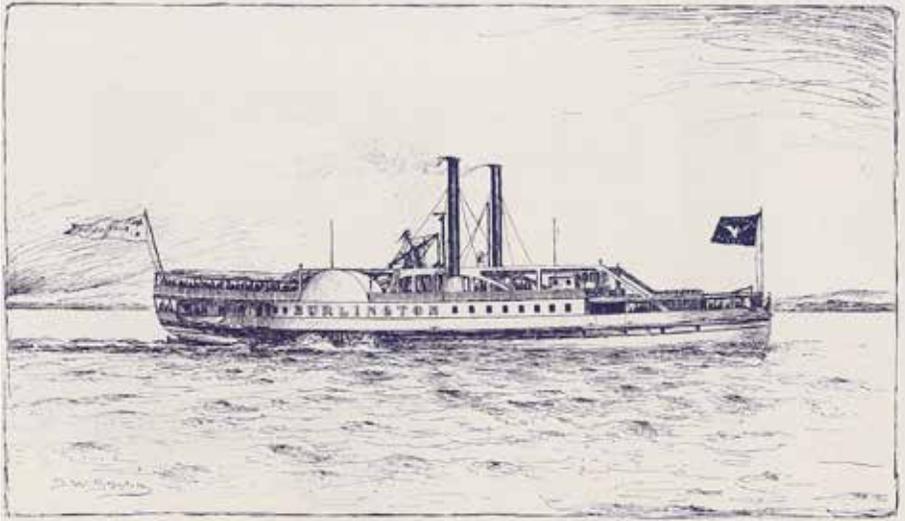
Or, as Mrs. Hall rather bluntly put it, “as to sleep I had none, and such crowds of passengers and such heaps of bugs, altogether it was vastly disagreeable.”<sup>40</sup>

Cather, on the other hand, included much more complimentary details about the routine on board a Lake Champlain passenger steamboat in 1836. He described going to dinner and being attended by “six or seven good looking

<sup>38</sup> “The Phoenix having discontinued running, to receive her new engine, the *Congress* will continue her trips the remainder of the season,” from *Vermont Aurora* (Vergennes, Vermont), 8 November 1827, 3; “A new and powerful engine has been obtained for the Phoenix,” from *Vermont Aurora*, 6 December 1827, 3.

<sup>39</sup> Hall, “Travels in North America,” 6.

<sup>40</sup> Pope-Hennessy, *The Aristocratic Journey*, 58.



Captain Richard Sherman's steamboat Burlington from Samuel Ward Stanton's 1895 collection, *American Steam Vessels*. (Wikimedia Commons)

boys dressed as pages.”<sup>41</sup> Cather also wrote about the attendants “skipping about and supplying the wants of the guests with the greatest activity, and even anticipating their wishes,” indicating once again Captain Sherman’s diligent ordering of his staff.<sup>42</sup>

In general, the discrepancies between the accounts provided by the Halls and those written by Cather, Brown, and Dickens may be explained by enhancements in steamship construction and operations that improved the passenger experience. Steamboat technology and outfitting improved so rapidly during the 1820s and 1830s that the Halls’ steamboat in 1827, either *Congress* or *Phoenix*, likely looked and performed nothing like *Franklin* and *Burlington* during the 1830s and 1840s. Advancements made in the nearly twenty years between *Phoenix* and *Burlington*’s construction dates included lighter hulls and the replacement of crosshead-beam engines with walking-beam engines.<sup>43</sup> *Franklin* was also reportedly the first steamer on the lake to have its boilers on the paddlewheel guards rather than in the hold and to have a ladies’ cabin on the main deck, making the passenger experience unequivocally more comfortable.<sup>44</sup> Further, the Halls highlighted that their trip took place

<sup>41</sup> Yoseloff, *Voyage to America*, 162.

<sup>42</sup> Yoseloff, *Voyage to America*, 162.

<sup>43</sup> Kennedy, “Shelburne Shipyard Steamboat Graveyard: Archaeological Investigation of Four Steamboat Wrecks,” 166-167.

<sup>44</sup> *Burlington Free Press*, 16 November 1827, 4; Ross, *Steamboats*, 53.

overnight.<sup>45</sup> In 1827, it took *Congress* and *Phoenix* over fifteen hours to travel the 120 mile (190 km) lake, not including stops, at a speed of eight miles per hour (12.9 km/h). In 1837, *Burlington* was able to cut that time nearly in half, making the trip undoubtedly more enjoyable for the passengers. Thomas Brown stated that *Burlington* left its namesake port “a little after ten with a high wind, and rough sea rolling, which prevented the engine from doing its best; but we nevertheless reached St. Johns, 75 miles [(120 km)], in four hours and a half.”<sup>46</sup> He also recorded that the steamer was able to make the run from Whitehall to St. John’s in nine hours and forty-five minutes, including a stop at Burlington. This huge increase in speed in only ten years meant that a trip on Lake Champlain was much easier on passengers in 1837 than in 1827.

### Addressing Bias

These travellers’ journals and notes are invaluable to the historical record, and yet it is worthwhile to mention some issues that the modern historian may encounter in attempting to use them as accurate historical accounts. In his essay “Travel Narratives,” Jerry Bentley rightly points out that throughout history, travellers’ accounts have been prone to bias. In some cases, the writer’s own ethnocentric views might have coloured their experiences abroad.<sup>47</sup> This type of bias may have contributed to the Halls’ negative descriptions of their steamboat journey. The British Halls may not have been hasty to dole out compliments to American-made craft. Further, while it is easy enough to empathize with any traveller’s lack of sleep, Basil Hall’s discontent over the steamer making additional stops along its route and the sound of steam-powered paddlewheels – a technology only twenty years old at the time – keeping him awake seems somewhat unreasonable.<sup>48</sup> While the Halls may have had some legitimate complaints, their diaries have the tones of people wishing to complain about the discomforts of travel and should not be taken as an indictment of Lake Champlain steamers.

In other cases, prejudice in travel accounts may crop up if the traveller is seeking to make a subjective point about politics or ideologies through their descriptions of foreign lands, industry, or technology, thereby exaggerating certain aspects to reflect their interests.<sup>49</sup> This latter point becomes apparent in Thomas S. Brown’s glowing description of *Burlington*. Brown was an

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<sup>45</sup> Hall, “Travels in North America,” 5.

<sup>46</sup> Brown, *Montreal Vindicator*, 24 October 1837, 3.

<sup>47</sup> Bentley, “Travel Narratives.”

<sup>48</sup> Hall, “Travels in North America,” 5.

<sup>49</sup> Bentley, “Travel Narratives.”

advocate for social and political reform, supported the concept of responsible government, and greatly admired American democracy. He was a member of the Patriote party, the popular movement that contributed to the Rebellions of 1837-38 in Lower Canada. In fact, just weeks after his cruise on *Burlington*, Brown was seriously wounded and his home vandalized by members of the Doric Club, a paramilitary group formed in opposition to the Patriotes. Thus, when Brown used his experience on *Burlington* to praise American democracy and liberty, and to credit its form of government with the Americans' ability to excel in technology and industry – in this case building steamboats – his political ideology shows:

May we not call these people 'Gods?' Men living in little villages, along the shore of an inland lake, who cannot content themselves with the 'great enterprise' of constructing a ferry boat after obtaining the prayers of the church, but who must presumptuously build a steam boat to compare with the most magnificent structure that breasts the waves! Such is the effect of Democratic 'Town meetings,' the 'primary schools' of Liberty, which develop [*sic*] intelligence; which weigh men in a balance, and discarding those who are found wanting, reward the men of full sound weight.

In contrast, residents of the Canadas, beholden to the "bondsman of Europe," could not match the "superior industry" of their American neighbours.<sup>50</sup>

## Conclusion

Though it may be necessary to approach travel narratives with a critical eye, the contents of these accounts include otherwise unknowable information for archaeologists and historians seeking to envision life aboard these steamers. The Shelburne Shipyard Steamboat Graveyard Project has shown that the archaeological data from the remains of two of the three steamers discussed above is not enough to fully grasp the complete picture of these

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<sup>50</sup> The rest of Brown's statement: "While the bondsman of Europe regards property as public patrimony, which by favoritism, exclusive privileges, and unequal legislation, has become concentrated in the hands of a few to enable them to oppress the many, he looks upon its very existence as an evil, and feel little interest in its protection: but the American, beholding in the attainment of wealth the simple recompense of superior industry, sobriety and prudence, rejoices in the augmentation of that which cannot be enjoyed without diffusing general benefit to the community; and therefore, though he may envy the good fortune of the possessor, he questions not his right of possession." From Brown, *Montreal Vindicator*, 24 October 1837, 3; Fernand Ouellet, "Brown, Thomas Storrow," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* volume 11 (University of Toronto/University of Laval, 2003), [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/brown\\_thomas\\_storrow\\_11E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/brown_thomas_storrow_11E.html).

boats. Details about what life was like on board for both the crew and the passengers can only be limitedly gleaned from the archaeological artifacts, and since the boats were stripped down to the bare bones of their hulls before being left to sink, the material evidence adds nothing to what the upperworks of these ornate vessels resembled. Additionally, no historical ship plans for any of these Lake Champlain steamboats have been located. Without plans or archaeological evidence, researchers must rely on accounts like the ones studied in this article to visualize these boats and gain an understanding of what traveling aboard them was like. Cather's excellent description of Captain Sherman and the crew gives the steamboats personality. Dickens' description of *Burlington* as a "floating palace" illustrates the magnificence of these lake steamers, while Brown's detailed description of the steamer's inner décor and upperworks provides essential information that could lend to a more accurate reconstruction of the boat.

Moving forward, further research into travel accounts of passengers aboard contemporaneous Hudson River and St. Lawrence River steamers would be beneficial to determine whether Lake Champlain's were truly superior, as the travel narratives of Cather, Brown, and Dickens imply. Whether or not Champlain's steamboats were really the best, these journals are useful resources for archaeological and historical reconstruction purposes and provide an anthropological look into steamboat culture during the first half of the nineteenth century.

*Dr. Carolyn Kennedy is Associate Director of the Center for Maritime Archaeology and Conservation and an Instructional Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology at Texas A&M University. Dr. Kennedy is currently co-directing the Gaspé Maritime Archaeology Project (2019-), while her past projects include the Shelburne Shipyard Steamboat Graveyard Project (2014-2016), and work on the CityPlace Schooner Project (2018), and the Alexandria Historic Shipwreck Project (2019-2020). (Contact: [carolynkennedy13@tamu.edu](mailto:carolynkennedy13@tamu.edu))*